

Jehu Baker



Abridged Speech
Oct. 2, 1858

ABRIDGED SPEECH

OF

J E H U B A K E R ,

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SPEECH OF JEHU BAKER.

Fellow Citizens:

In appearing before you as a candidate for Congress in this district, I must confess I feel some degree of embarrassment from the perfectly new and strange position which I occupy. My habits, my natural inclinations, my studies and employments have not been such as to kindle in my mind the love and pursuit of office. I never before was a candidate for any official position, and can truly say that I did honestly suppose until quite recently that I never would be. Obeying, however, the warm solicitations—I might almost say the commands, of numerous friends in various parts of the district, I now speak to you in the character of a candidate—resolved, nevertheless, as I must say in justice to myself, that my character as a man, shall never be swallowed up in the politician and the office seeker. If there is one conviction which has grown and strengthened with my whole life and my whole experience, it is that the integrity of a man's innermost soul is to be preferred above all the ambitious aims of life, and that the loss of that, is the loss of all for which God has placed man on this earth. I have no other apology for the expression of such a sentiment in a political speech, than the spontaneous intensity with which I feel the truth of it, and to put down, at the very beginning of my remarks, a protest against that extended impression in the public mind, that a candidate for office *cannot* be a sincere man. If I thought that a damaged character were the necessary price of office, I should feel that it were better to

perish than stand before the people for their votes. I do not believe, however, that the arts of cunning and intrigue are the most powerful means of gaining the support of majorities. I will not think so meanly of human nature as this. I believe that reason and moral honesty and patriotism are the ruling elements in the American mind. I believe that plain, artless, downright truth, is on the whole more powerful and more popular than cunning and deceit. I believe that men are more deeply and more generally moved by appealing to their understanding and virtue, than to their prejudices and vices. I do not, therefore, recognize the legitimacy of those views, according to which it is necessary for a candidate to unman himself, and to descend to that variety of mean expedients which are supposed to be essential to success. And if I *did* recognize their legitimacy, I am quite sure I should never act upon them.

I will make the further introductory remark, that in my opinion one of the most damaging evils in the political state of our country is the degree of rancor, vulgarity and falsehood which prevails in our political discussions. This is an evil which I am persuaded most men of all parties must realize. As a general thing, a candidate for office must either be constitutionally insensible, or he must possess nerves of steel and a face of flint, in order to meet that torrent of detraction, misrepresentation and slander which is poured out upon his devoted head; and truth requires me to add that this is applicable in a great measure to all sec-

tions and parties of the country. My firm conviction is, that the discussion of our great political questions before the people, whether from the stump or the press, should be marked with that dignity, decency and love of truth which we look for and require in the private relations of life. There is no reason on earth why a man, when he comes to deal with public affairs, should lay aside the obligations of fair dealing, and the manners and language of a gentleman. I must say, however, and it gives me the greatest pleasure to say it, that I do not know in this entire district, a single man, a single editor, no matter what our political differences may be, who I believe is disposed to assail me with wanton and unfounded abuse; and one reason possibly is, that I have always entertained and expressed the opinion, that whatever our party differences may be, we should never forget that we are fellow citizens, having a common interest and a common destiny, and that the great masses composing all parties are in a like degree sincere in the wish to promote the welfare of our common country. Nor am I able to see that such sentiments of reasonable charity, are at all inconsistent with the firmest adherence to one's own principles, and the most forcible and influential expression of them.

CAUSE OF OUR POLITICAL TROUBLES.

If we would seek a cure for our political evils we must first look to their cause. Adopting the opinion of DANIEL WEBSTER, as expressed in his speech of March 7th, 1850, it appears to me perfectly plain, that the source from which our present troubles proceed, will be found to consist in a twofold departure from the great *Conservative principles* in which our government was founded, and in which all men, North and South, were united at the time. On either side of those great principles there has grown up an extreme form of opinion, one in the North and one in the South, and to the action of these extremes we must refer the sectional agitation and bitterness which

has taken place in the country. Before these extremes took root there was entire harmony and unanimity of feeling and opinion North and South, and when we shall carry popular opinion and the administration of the government back to the old starting point, that harmony will return.

THE OLD CONSERVATIVE PRINCIPLE.

If we look back to the beginning of our government we shall find that there was scarcely any difference of opinion in relation to slavery. In the North and in the South alike, and quite universally, it was regarded as a great and deplorable evil. In the language of Mr. Webster, "the eminent men, the most eminent men, and nearly all the conspicuous politicians of the South, held the same sentiments; that slavery was an evil, a blight, a blast, a mildew, a scourge and a curse." It was expected that on the stoppage of the importation of slaves, slavery would begin to run out, and gradually disappear from the country. The opinions of Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Franklin, Henry, Lee, and the whole rank and file of illustrious men of that day, with scarcely an exception, are known to have been strongly averse to slavery. Such was the original state of opinion in the whole country. If we look to the *acts* of those great men, we shall find that they corresponded with the prevailing opinion of the time. They left slavery in the States where they found it, but by the Ordinance of 13th July, 1787, they excluded it from all the territory then owned by the country—that is from that great northwestern Territory, since divided up into the States of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan and Wisconsin. Every member of every slaveholding State voted for that Ordinance and that prohibition. Shortly after the new government went into operation those same men put that same Ordinance in force under our present Constitution. Not only this:—early in the present century, Congress was five times applied to for a suspension of that portion of the ordinance which prohibited slavery;

and five times Congress refused the suspension. Such then was the state of sentiment, and such the action in relation to slavery, before, at the beginning, and sometime after our government went into operation. There was no agitation, no bitterness, no angry warfare made upon slavery;—all, however, regarded it as an evil, and by general consent, and without opposition from any quarter, it was excluded from the entire Territory of the country.

THE NORTHERN EXTREME.

In the course of time, a form of opinion took hold of a small portion of the Northern mind which Mr. Webster speaks of as being "much more warm and strong against slavery" than that which prevailed in the beginning. The opposition to slavery by the fathers of the country was constitutional and conservative, and did much good. The extreme opposition of which I now speak is violent and excessive, and calculated to be mischievous instead of beneficial. I will glance at some of the points of this extreme. Resistance of the fugitive slave law by mob violence was unknown to the early history of our government. The sentiment that the constitution, because it sustains a limited relation to slavery, is "a covenant with death and a league with hell" was equally unknown. The notion that our Union should be dissolved as a means of removing responsibility for slavery, and offering a more efficient means of assailing it in the South, had no place in the great and sane minds which made the Union. I will add that angry publications, written in a bitter and uncharitable spirit, and calculated to kindle the hatred of the Northern mind against a considerable portion of the Southern people is a mode of assailing slavery which the wise and practical men of the first age of our government never dreamed of resorting to. Thus we see there has grown up in a portion of the Northern mind—and I must say that I do not believe that class to be very large—an extreme feeling of hostility to slavery—extreme

when compared with the conservative opposition to that great evil which was put forth by the fathers of the country.

THE SOUTHERN EXTREME.

The Southern extreme which has diverged off from the old doctrine of the country, Mr. Webster states in similar language, by saying that it has grown "much more warm and strong" in support of slavery. Instead of being "a blight, a blast, a mildew, a scourge and a curse," as it was regarded by the virtuous and great men of the Revolution, slavery is now spoken of as "no evil, no scourge, but as a great religious, social and moral blessing." I will not stop to enquire, in any detail, what is the cause of this change of opinion in a portion of the Southern mind. Mr. Webster attributes it to the increased production and profit of the cotton plantations of the South. He refers to the fact that in the years 1790 and '91 the export of cotton did not exceed forty or fifty thousand dollars, and that in 1850 it would scarcely fall short of a hundred millions. Slavery having become profitable in this line of production (which it was not at an earlier day,) the opinion of the slave-holder underwent a change corresponding to his material interest. Instead of an evil as it was held by the fathers, it came to be regarded as a blessing. And to fit this new and extreme opinion, a new and extreme Constitutional doctrine has been invented and installed in power. I allude to that monstrous doctrine of Mr. Calhoun, the great organizer and leader of this Southern extreme, that the Constitution carries and plants slavery in the Territories, and that neither Congress nor the people of the Territory themselves can exclude it if they wish to! This horrible doctrine, expressing the extremest sentiment of the extremest portion of our Southern brethren, is now battling for ascendancy over the public mind of the whole country! I need not argue that such a doctrine is utterly indefensible. Every Republican in this district, almost every American, and old line Whig, and a

large portion of the Democrats within my knowledge, regard it as totally unsound. It is perfectly obvious that it is a wide and extreme departure from the principles of those great and good men who made the Constitution and administered it in their day and generation. As we have seen, the doctrine at that time was to leave slavery as they found it in the States, but to exclude it from the Territories, and to keep it excluded. The pretended doctrine now is that the *Constitution establishes slavery in the Territories*, and that the power to exclude it does not exist, either in Congress, or in the territorial inhabitants, or elsewhere on earth! The contrast here is too bold and plain to admit of cavil or evasion. Well did that great Southern statesman, Mr. Clay, say of this extreme Calhoun doctrine, in 1850, that, "*If he had not heard that opinion avowed, he should have regarded it as one of the most extraordinary assumptions, and the most indefensible position that was ever taken by man!*" Thus we see that an extreme pro-slavery opinion, utterly unknown in the conservative age of the country, has grown up in a certain portion of the Southern mind, and that a new, extreme and monstrous pro-slavery doctrine has been invented to accommodate that change of opinion. That doctrine is now at the head of the Federal Government; and planted in these high places of influence, it is exerting its whole power to change the entire law and policy of slavery, to debauch the public opinion of the country, and to sweep the Constitution from the ancient moorings, where it was left by the great statesmen who framed it!

PACIFIC RAILROAD.

I will next offer a few remarks upon a subject which ought to fix the attention of the whole people, and especially of those living in this portion of Illinois. I allude to the construction of a railroad to the Pacific Ocean. The feasibility of this enterprise, at an estimated cost of about sixty millions of dollars, is placed beyond doubt. It only re-

mains for the different sections of the country to unite on a route which will be most beneficial to the whole. Between an extreme Northern route, an extreme Southern route, and a middle union route, no fair minded man, who wishes the common good of the entire country, can hesitate for a moment. It is plain that that great work should be laid down upon a line as near as may be about the center of territory and population. When thus constructed, it will be a band of iron, uniting the Eastern and Western halves of our continent. When thus constructed, the commerce of Asia and the Pacific Ocean will pour through this great artery, and diffuse itself by collateral branches through all the North, through all the South, and to every nook and corner of the whole country. It appears to me that St. Louis, by its central position and great commercial importance is the proper point of departure for that line of road which should be continued thence to the Pacific Ocean. Now, I wish strongly to draw the attention of the people of this district to the fact that that same pro-slavery extreme of which I have just spoken, and which is now in control of this government, is *equally extreme in its ideas in reference to the construction of this great national road*. That extreme, as the whole country knows, is committed to the construction of this road *upon our South-Western border*. In pursuit of this scheme, and under the lead of those extremists, a few years ago our government paid ten millions of dollars for what was known as the Gadsden Purchase—a barren strip of territory taken from the Northern border of Mexico, but supposed to furnish an eligible route to the Pacific. The people should be aroused to this subject. They should look it square in the face, no matter to what party they may belong. If this road should be constructed upon our Southern frontier—upon what Col. Benton called the "disunion border route," instead of the "central union route," every body must see that it would not only be detrimental to the great

interests of the West, and to the great interests of the common country as a whole, but that it would also have a direct and powerful disunion tendency.

PUBLIC EXPENDITURES.

There is another subject to which I wish strongly to call the attention of the people. I allude to the public expenditures. Beyond all doubt we have fallen off amazingly from the simplicity and economy of our fathers, both in our private and in our public life; and candor requires me to say that this applies in a great measure to all parties, because it proceeds in a great degree out of the general habit of the times. We have grown luxurious and extravagant. A spirit of dashing interprise, speculation and recklessness is abroad among us. The thorough paced regularity and prudence of the olden time is growing unfashionable, and government, in common with individuals, has caught the general infection of the times. It is true, however, that the longer any party remains in power, the more corrupt and extravagant it will become. I will say nothing of the small scale of expenditures, under our early Presidents. As proof of our rapid downward tendency of late, I will merely state that the last year of Fillmore's administration cost only about *forty-two millions of dollars*, while the last year of Pierce's cost about *sixty-five millions*, the first year of Buchanan's about *eighty millions*, and the present year about *one hundred millions*. At the same rate our government will soon cost several hundred millions annually. It is true that the government expense *should* increase in a certain degree in consequence of the growth of the country; but it should not double and more than double, in eight years. I care not *where* the whole responsibility of this great expenditure may lie. I care not that a Republican House of Representatives may have stood connected with a portion of it. I look upon it as an evidence of corrupt extravagance, no matter from what source it may have proceeded; and as such

I draw the attention of the people to it, as an evil which should be corrected by the ballot box.

AMALGAMATION.

As to amalgamation of the white and negro races, my ideas are clear and distinct. I regard this intermixture of negroes and whites as odious and detestible. My reading of the natural law is, that in this respect God has placed a "high wall and a deep ditch" between these races; and my opinion is that any act of amalgamation of the two, whether in the marriage relation or otherwise, is vicious, brutal and debasing.

ABOLITION.

As to abolition, I will say that it is a matter which rests with the people of the States where slavery exists. The Constitution left slavery where it found it—that is, under State laws, and subject to the disposal of the people of the slaveholding States. No power exists in the Federal Government to abolish slavery in the States, and of course no power exists in one State to abolish it in another. Slavery in any State, therefore, is solely and exclusively under the control of such State. The people of a slaveholding State may abolish it if they see fit, or they may continue it if they see fit. It is purely a matter of State Sovereignty. No power anywhere exists, outside of a slaveholding State, to abolish slavery in such State; but the people of any given slave State, may do with it just what they please.

MY POSITION.

As to the general position which I occupy, it must be obvious from what I have already said. It is to stand upon *the old conservative principle* as I receive it from the fathers of the country—opposed to the fanatical extreme of the North, and the fanatical extreme of the South. This is the principle which presided at the birth of the Constitution. This is the principle which the whole country stood upon in the days of Washington and Jefferson; and this is the principle which the conservative masses of

the people North and South must yet stand upon.

What can be plainer, what can address itself more powerfully to the common sense of the whole people, than that those great principles in which our constitution and union were *founded*, must continue to be cherished as the best means of *preserving* the Constitution and Union? Can we find a safer chart for the navigation of the perilous sea that lies before us than the one which was left us by the *builders* of our nobleship of state,—than the one which in *their* hands guided that ship so safely and so prosperously? Great God! have we already fallen upon that decay of virtue which marks the ruin of nations! Are we ready to turn our backs upon all the glorious monuments of the past? Are we ready to extinguish in our hearts those great principles which burned in the bosoms of the men who gave us our liberties baptised in blood? We say that they are immortal. We say that the work of their hands is the noblest that ever was wrought by any generation of men in any age or country of the world. Their names are a theme of praise upon every tongue. The whole country turns with veneration to their tombs. Are we *dead* to their virtues? Are we *dead* to the principles in which they established and administered our government, and which they have handed down to us as a precious heritage, to be preserved for our children and our children's children? Are we ready to abandon that heritage—to abandon the position they occupied, and to yield to an extreme fanaticism, whether in the North or in the South? Are we ready to bow down to that violently extreme pro-slavery doctrine of Mr. Calhoun, by which our constitution becomes an engine for the establishment of slavery in every foot of American terri-

tory,—by which the moral sense of the whole country will become corrupted,—and by which all the opinions, examples and doctrines of the fathers are to be torn up and trampled under foot? No! No! is the spontaneous answer which leaps from every patriotic heart. The great masses of the people will rush to no such an extreme. They will stand upon the great conservative doctrines they have received from the immortal statesmen who framed our institutions. Voters of the Eighth Congressional District! I stand now upon those doctrines and appeal to your reason, your conscience, and your patriotism. I appeal to you to rally to that platform of principles which were laid down by those great builders who were fresh from the battle-fields of the revolution! I speak for the country and the whole country. I am not conscious that there is one particle of sectional feeling in my heart. Looking across Mason & Dixon's line upon the sunny South, I behold the land of my nativity and my early childhood. Not in all my past is there a memory more holy than that which gathers around the green hills of old Kentucky! May my right arm be withered ere I lift tongue or hand against her fair fame, her security and happiness! The old battle-field of Eutaw Springs, in South Carolina, brings the same emotion to my mind that is kindled by Bunker Hill, in Massachusetts. As the men of that time were one in feeling, so we will be again, when we return to the principles in which they founded and administered our government. These were the principles of Washington, Jefferson, Franklin, Madison, and the whole array of heroes and sages who made that age at least equal in luster to any recorded in the history of the world. Upon these principles I stand for the votes of this District.

